

SIERRA CLUB COMMENTS FOR THE U.S. CORAL REEF TASK FORCE – 2/27/2008

Task Force Chairs, members, and fellow participants: My name is Judith Lang, Vice-Chair of the Sierra Club's Coral Reef Working Group. Dave Raney, Chair of the Working Group, sends his greetings and donates the carbon credits from one (forgone) round trip between Honolulu and Washington DC to the goal of a carbon-neutral Task Force meeting.

We are pleased that the Task Force has formally recognized Roger Griffis for his many accomplishments in facilitating the growth of the Task Force over the past decade. Roger has brought extraordinary energy, dedication, and skill to this task. We value the constructive relationship we have with Roger, and wish him well in his new assignment. We also wish Kacky Andrews well in her new position, and look forward to working with her to advance the important work of the Task Force.

As we enter the International Year of the Reef 2008, we can celebrate the many achievements of the Task Force and its partners, but must also face the sobering reality that the overall health of coral reefs worldwide has declined despite these achievements, and the fate of coral reefs is uncertain at this point.

The December 13, 2007 Press Release from NOAA titled "New Science Paper Says Carbon Emissions Threaten Reefs," includes the stark warning that **".. most coral reefs will not survive the rapid increases in global temperatures and atmospheric CO₂ that are forecast over this century by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change unless drastic action is taken to curb CO₂ emissions. Even emission curbs will not be enough without concerted management of other threats to these ecosystems."**

So, the challenges are clear. The question is whether or not enough citizens of this planet right now can combine their individual voices and individual actions into a force strong enough to meet these challenges and drag any reluctant political leaders along with them. Can we do this? Yes, we can – and we must.

The Sierra Club has already made combating global warming a top priority, and has engaged its 750,000 members in a campaign to reduce carbon emissions 80 percent by the year 2050. As part of the International Year of the Reef, the Sierra Club's Marine Wildlife and Habitat Committee will be making sure that the Club's membership, including those members living in the heartland, learns how important their actions are for the future of coral reefs. Many other environmental NGOs have also engaged their members in efforts to combat global warming, as it has become clear that global warming affects most or all of their other missions.

We have long urged the Task Force to take a leadership role, especially at the federal level, in addressing the causes of global warming as well as its impacts, and to specifically address the need to reduce carbon emissions. We have also supported the initiatives presented by Governor Tulafono of American Samoa and the All Islands Committee regarding the need for the Task Force to address the causes of global warming. We note that at its August 2007 meeting in American Samoa, the Task Force adopted Resolution 18.1, Coral Reefs and Climate Change, in response to concerns raised by the Governor and others. Although much of the resolution reiterates the need to deal with the impacts of global warming, the resolution also includes the following statement under the Response section:

"Protection of coral reefs from the impacts of climate change will require two approaches, First, federal, state, and territory governments need to partner with other key players, including industry, to reduce the rates of greenhouse gas emissions. Second, as coral reefs continue to decline globally, reef managers must strengthen efforts to build resilience into their ecosystems by working with communities to address local threats."

This is an important, and welcome, statement that at last puts first things first. We are also encouraged that the Statement Decisions include the following: (The USCRTF) **2. Recognizes the importance of ongoing and continued actions by members and partners to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.**

Resolution 18.1 also created a standing Climate Change Working Group to advise the Task Force on climate change issues. As we await the results of their efforts to date, we remind you that time is passing and that reducing carbon emissions 80 percent by the year 2050 only commits each of us to cutting back on our individual carbon footprint by 2% each year over what it was the previous year – which will become increasingly easy to achieve as more efficient technology is developed or adopted. Put like this, the task is far from impossible. At the very least, given the distances many participants must travel to attend your semiannual meetings, we urge the Task Force to host carbon-neutral events after the fashion of this summer's 11th International Coral Reef Symposium whose efforts we commend, and such annual gatherings as the Consumer Electronics Show, the South by Southwest Music, Film & Interactive Festivals, and the Burning Man art festivities.

As many researchers have noted repeatedly, concerted management of other threats to coral reefs is needed together with reductions in CO₂ emissions. In this regard, our members in Southeast Florida have expressed concerns over localized degradation to coral reefs, cyanobacterial and algal blooms in particular, associated with wastewater treatment plant discharges through ocean outfalls along their coastline. We are pleased that the Florida Department of Environmental Protection has developed draft legislation that calls for the eventual phase out of the ocean outfalls now in place in Southeast Florida, and requires enhanced waste treatment during the interim while the outfalls remain in operation. The Sierra Club has submitted comments supporting this proposed legislation.

At the federal level, we need to assure passage of legislation to reauthorize the Coral Reef Conservation Act of 2000, and Sierra Club is working with other NGOs to achieve this goal.

Thank you for the opportunity to present our comments.